



**Williamston Theatre**  
**Page to Stage Discussion Series**  
**How to Read a Play**

**On the page**

Reading a play is very different than reading a book. It's missing much of the information that a book has – including descriptions of how characters are feeling or the environment or rules of the world in which the play takes place. It often takes practice to get your mind adjusted to reading plays and filling in the blanks of what is not there. Sometimes reading a play can feel like a cold experience, which is very different than seeing it come to life on stage.

What you can expect to find in a script:

- List of characters' names. Sometimes their ages, ethnicities, and relationships to one another.
- A setting: the place and time. Sometimes that might be as simple as Here and Now.
- Notes from the playwright. Sometimes the playwright will explain intentions or special requirements of the scripts.
- Stage directions. These are usually separated from the dialogue with parentheses or are in italics.
- None of the above. Sometimes the playwright leaves it up to the reader to figure all this information out as they read.

**On the stage**

A production team comes together to mount a play, that includes the director, designers (scenic, lighting, costume, properties, sound, media/projections), stage management, stage crew members, and actors. The director and design team begin meeting months before rehearsals begin to discuss themes, the general and more specific design elements, and how to tell the story. Much discussion happens, and renderings and photos of design elements are proposed and debated. A good portion of the planning work is completed before the first rehearsal happens. When actors come in and begin to rehearse the play, more discoveries are made and design elements are adapted based on those discoveries. The story is interpreted by a team of artists who work together to bring it to life. You might see the same play at two (or more) theatres, and it will be vastly different each time because of the unique artistry of each member of the production team

**Things to keep in mind as you read a play**

- You'll see the character's name listed and then the dialogue that they speak.
- Read slowly and make sure you don't skip the stage directions so you don't miss anything important.
- Questions to ask yourself:
  - What character's story is it?
  - What characters change? What characters stay the same?
  - What do the different characters want? And, importantly, what is in the way of them getting it?
  - What's the overall theme, in your mind? What do you think the playwright wants people to feel, think about, or talk about after the play? Keep in mind, when considering "theme": the play may be set in a world different than the one we grew up in. The life experiences of the audience may be vastly different than the life experienced by the characters in the play. Still - the message should be universal enough to reach everyone by tapping into the truth of the human condition. Fear, love, loss, inclusion, ambition, heartbreak, hope – these are understood to be the same across the entirety of human existence.